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Sandinistas Celebrate Anniversary Of Victory

by LADB Staff

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On July 19, the Nicaraguan opposition Frente Sandinista de la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) celebrated the 23rd anniversary of its overthrow of the dictatorship of ex- president Anastasio Somoza (1963-1979). At the celebration in Managua, FSLN leaders affirmed their faith in socialism and called upon the US to pay war reparations to Nicaragua.

Describing the scene of the celebrations, the Nicaraguan daily El Nuevo Diario said that the anti-imperialist tone of FSLN general secretary Daniel Ortega's speech was reminiscent of his speeches during the bitter conflict with the US during the 1980s.

Speaking before 100,000 people, ex-President Ortega (1979-1990) called on Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos to demand that the US comply with a 1989 International Court ruling at The Hague to compensate Nicaragua for damages caused by the US-sponsored contra war. "We have never done harm to the United States, we have never planted a bomb in the United States, we have never mined its harbors, we have never sent troops," Ortega said. "They were the ones that brought war upon us." Ortega says that, with US\$17 billion in compensation, Nicaragua could pay all of its debts, both external and internal, and still have money left over to stimulate an economic recovery and fund social programs.

Ortega said that the FSLN wanted to work with the Bolanos administration to develop joint solutions to Nicaragua's socioeconomic problems, such as the lack of access to education and medical services. He called for unity between the FSLN and the Bolanos administration in confronting the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. In reference to the policies that these international financial institutions seek to impose in Nicaragua, Ortega said that "we must struggle against this unjust and corrupt form of globalization" that brings "more hunger and unemployment and less production."

Expressing solidarity with Cuba, Ortega said that the FSLN did not have to seek permission from Washington to have friends like Cuban leader Fidel Castro. FSLN Vice General Secretary Tomas Borge called on Castro to include the FSLN in the list of those who are "faithful to socialist principles."

US maintains hostility toward FSLN

With Ortega at the helm of the party, the FSLN has been defeated in the country's last three presidential elections. Since the Sandinistas lost power in 1990, many achievements of the Sandinista Revolution have been reversed. Agrarian reform, the fundamental pillar of the revolution, has undergone a counter-reform because of the lack of credit for campesinos who received land. Nicaraguan economist Alejandro Martinez Cuenca said that in the past decade the number of poor people in Nicaragua has risen to 3.5 million, about 70% of the population.

During the 2001 presidential campaign, several polls placed Ortega ahead of Bolanos, the candidate of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC). Some suggest that a US government campaign against Ortega frightened voters and contributed to Bolanos' victory (see NotiCen, 2001-11-08). Bolanos took advantage of the political climate in the US in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, accusing the FSLN of ties to terrorists (see NotiCen, 2001-10-18).

Throughout the campaign, officials of the George W. Bush administration openly accused the FSLN of ties with Iraq, Libya, and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). US administrations have a history of meddling in Nicaraguan elections. In 1989 and 1990 the US administration of President George H.W. Bush reportedly funneled US\$12 million to the presidential campaign of Violeta Chamorro, who defeated Ortega in 1990 (see Update, 1991-10-18).

Since the 2001 presidential race, the FSLN's relations with the US government have remained tense. In June, Ortega's US visa was suspended because of continued complaints that lands owned by US citizens that were confiscated during the Sandinista government had not been returned. Ortega responded to the suspension of his US visa by calling US Ambassador to Nicaragua Oliver Garza a "Yankee enemy of humanity."

In mid-July, US authorities detained FSLN Deputy Bayardo Arce for 24 hours in the Miami airport because his name was on a blacklist of people not welcome in the country. On vacation with his wife, Arce had stopped in Miami to switch flights en route to Spain. Despite presenting a diplomatic passport and a transit visa, as well as documents that identified him as a Nicaraguan deputy, he was detained without any explanation. FSLN Deputy Edwin Castro said that Arce's detention "did not contribute to improving relations with the United States, which pretends to be the gendarme of democracy." He added, "These are totally totalitarian attitudes that violate the rights of citizens."

Ortega expresses support for Bolano's anti-corruption fight

Despite Ortega's bitterness at US meddling in the recent elections, the FSLN leader maintains a dialogue with Bolanos and expresses support for the president's campaign against corruption. When Sandinista Deputy Nelson Artola said in June that Bolanos should be removed from office for being "totally incapable" of resolving the country's economic crisis, FSLN leaders were quick to criticize Artola's position. Herty Lewites, the Sandinista mayor of Managua, said, "I will die a Sandinista, but I consider the declarations of Deputy Artola to be totally irresponsible." FSLN leaders seemed eager to dispel the notion that Artola's statement represented a temporary political alliance between the FSLN and a faction of the PLC that has fought Bolano's anti-corruption efforts at the behest of ex-President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002).

Evidence continues to mount that Aleman's administration was highly corrupt (see NotiCen, 2002- 07-18). In 1999, Ortega negotiated a highly unpopular constitutional pact with Aleman that guaranteed assembly seats to outgoing presidents and vice presidents and second-place finishers of presidential races (see Noticen, 1999-12-23). Through this agreement, Aleman has managed to maintain control of the PLC as a national deputy and use his parliamentary immunity to avoid prosecution on corruption charges (see NotiCen, 2002-01-17).

In addition, the pact weakened the independence of the comptroller general's office, thus diminishing its capacity to investigate corruption within Aleman's administration. As a power-sharing arrangement between the PLC and the FSLN, the pact also marginalized small political parties (see NotiCen, 2000-07-27). Some suggest that Ortega agreed to the pact to avoid prosecution on charges of sexual abuse brought by his step-daughter Zoilamerica Narvaez (EcoCentral, 1998-03-19).

An Appeals Court recently dismissed Narvaez's charges on the grounds that the statute of limitations for Ortega's alleged crimes had expired. Nowadays Ortega rejects any proposed pact with Aleman that would cripple Bolanos' anti-corruption efforts. The FSLN leader says that "the struggle against corruption must continue to remove the country from misery."

Sandinista dissidents call Ortega a "caudillo"

Ortega says that the Sandinistas deserve credit for bringing democracy to Nicaragua. He says that, if the Sandinistas had not done away with the Somoza dictatorship, the elections of 1984, 1990, 1996, and 2001 would never have taken place. However, some of Ortega's former allies have questioned his democratic credentials.

Sergio Ramirez, FSLN vice president under Ortega, and Ernesto Cardenal, former FSLN minister of culture, have labeled both Aleman and Ortega "caudillos" who "hijacked" democracy in Nicaragua with their infamous political pact of 1999 (see NotiCen, 2001-10-18). Ramirez abandoned the ranks of the FSLN in 1995 and founded a party of Sandinista dissidents, the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS), which he envisioned as an alternative political project of democratic socialism (see NotiSur, 1995-02-17).

Reporter Aura Lila Moreno of El Nuevo Diario said, "The FSLN is about to suffer a much worse rupture than that of 1995." She said a new rebellion would come not from inside the leadership of the FSLN "but from among its own grassroots militants." Moreno says that "irregularities and arbitrary actions" have marred the FSLN's internal electoral process. She claims that local political secretaries from hundreds of neighborhoods around the country have been excluded from assemblies to elect the party's municipal, district, and departmental leaders.

Angry local FSLN political secretaries claim that district leaders have manipulated internal elections by bribing local leaders and stacking assemblies with illegitimate delegates. Some critics claim that Ortega does not take action against internal-election fraud because the party bosses who commit fraud are loyal to him. Among those expressing concern about the lack of internal democracy is Victor Hugo Tinoco, a member of the FSLN's Consejo Politico Nacional.

Ex-deputy Tinoco says that, when the FSLN lost past elections, the traditional party leadership decided to entrench itself rather than expand internal democracy. Tinoco claims that the traditional leadership has sought loyalty from party members and functionaries rather than through an improved electoral process whereby the most capable and respected figures are elected to leadership positions. "A party line develops whereby local political secretaries who were natural

and elected leaders begin to be replaced by people who will be personally loyal to the district political secretary," Tinoco says.

In turn, the district political secretary is loyal to the departmental political secretary, and the departmental political secretary is loyal to the party's traditional national leadership. Tinoco says that the emphasis on personal loyalty to the FSLN's traditional leadership generates political clientelism and opportunism on the part of people who see their participation in the party as a way to launch a political career. "It's not that the aspirations are not legitimate," says Tinoco, but that such aspirations should be motivated by political consciousness about the need for societal change, not simple career goals. Tinoco says the PLC and the FSLN "share the same political culture" and have some of the same problems, which include autocratic leadership, emphasis on personal loyalties, aversion to people with a critical spirit, and general intolerance.

However, FSLN Deputy Rene Nunez Tellez downplays the accusations of internal party fraud. Nunez points out that defects in electoral procedures are common. He emphasizes that the FSLN is the only Nicaraguan party that holds internal elections democratically and he rejects the notion that there is any similarity between the way that his party and the governing PLC choose their leadership. Nunez says the fundamental objectives of the FSLN's internal elections are to increase the organizing capacity of the people and to elect competent candidates who can mobilize the population to confront problems of unemployment, hunger, and the lack of health care.

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