

# *MESOAMERICA*

*Volume 26, Number 2, February 2007*

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## **NICARAGUA**

### **Communication Breakdown**

Directors of the national media and opposition lawmakers are questioning the legality of a controversial reform to the Executive Branch that creates several new government posts—the most controversial of which will be headed by First Lady Rosario Murillo.

The reform, known as Law 290, creates a new Ministry of Energy and Mines, as well as several new state institutes and advisory councils in the areas of public policy, development of the Atlantic Coast, youth and sports, food security, and the already polemic Council of Communication and Citizenship, headed by Murillo. The law was passed 24 Jan by a majority of 90 legislators in the National Assembly, including the 38 Sandinista lawmakers.

According to the law, the newly created advisory posts will not usurp any governmental functions currently attributed to other ministries or state institutions, and none will assume any executive powers. The new presidential advisory posts will not receive any salary.

Controversy, however, started almost immediately after the law was passed, when a memorandum leaked to the daily *La Prensa* revealed that the Finance Ministry was ordering the suspension of \$5.5 million in government funding for publicity and advertising for the various ministries and state institutions. The funding, according to the leaked memo, would now be coordinated by Murillo's Council of Communication and Citizenship.

Murillo said that the move was part of the government's new austerity program to dedicate limited state resources to where it is needed most: for social programs, rather than frivolous advertising by government ministries to tout their own accomplishments. The First Lady, whom many consider to be the real power behind Ortega's throne, said the spirit of her communication council was not to usurp government funds, but to coordinate the government's message.

The media and those suspicious of Murillo's aspirations for power are claiming that the council of communication is a thinly veiled effort to consolidate power and control information in the new

government. Putting Murillo in charge of information, they claim, is like putting the cat in charge of the milk—her tendency is not to share and to arch her back if anyone tries to get too close.

The directors of national media, much of which has been dependent on government advertising to stay afloat, argue that Murillo controlling spending on government publicity will be a way for the Sandinista government to reward loyal media with fat advertising contracts, and punish the opposition—namely the leading daily, *La Prensa*—by starving them of ad revenue.

Ortega and *La Prensa* are longtime foes: the Sandinista government heavily censored the newspaper and forced it to temporarily close in the '80s, and *La Prensa* has never had a nice word to say about Ortega, oftentimes blurring the lines between news reporting and editorial.

The various journalist unions claim that many of the smaller media will also be negatively affected by Murillo taking over the purse strings on government advertising, and have asked for a meeting with Ortega to clarify what is meant by the reforms.

While most people remain admittedly confused about the implications of Law 290, some opposition lawmakers are already challenging its legality, while others who voted for it are claiming there was nothing in the legislation authorizing the transfer of funds to Murillo's communication council.

Another somewhat controversial element of Law 290 is an article that moves the military intelligence agency, the Direction of Information for Defense (DIS), out of civilian hands and under the direct control of the National Army, and President Ortega.

Dissident lawmakers are arguing that the reforms are a way for Ortega to consolidate his power in the style of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez or Cuba's Fidel Castro. Others have warned that it marks the beginning of Ortega's return to the past. The majority who supported the bill, however, are not as worried.

Bayardo Arce, Ortega's right-hand man, noted that the DIS has always answered directly to the military, and that the law is part of package of state reforms urged by the International Monetary Fund.

## **U.S. Still Playing Nice**

Despite some recent tensions over allegations that the US was preparing to rearm Honduras with fighter jets, the historically tense relations between Washington, D.C. and the Sandinistas appear to remain on relatively good terms.

The US Ambassador to Nicaragua said in Jan that his government will continue to work with President Ortega, despite the closer relations that its erstwhile enemy has recently forged with Iran and Venezuela.

Shortly after taking office on 10 Jan, Ortega held high profile meetings with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, two world leaders openly defiant to the US. The three presidents signed a series of agreements meant to increase trade and cooperation between the three countries, raising concerns that a growing anti-US alliance could spread to Central America.

Following those meetings, US Ambassador Paul Trivelli said that the US will continue with the positive dialogue it started with Ortega after he won the presidency in Nov. “Despite that relationship with Iran, Venezuela, or any other country, we have a commitment to the Nicaraguan people,” said the Ambassador.

Trivelli said that the current US administration is willing to pursue better relations with the Sandinista leader and promised to “always cooperate with Nicaragua within the framework of democracy and the free market.”

But suspicions were raised at the beginning of Feb when Ortega said that it would be “absurd” for Nicaragua to destroy its remaining SAM-7 shoulder-launch missiles while the US was preparing to rearm Honduras’ Air Force.

The US Embassy released a statement on 4 Feb denying those allegations, and claiming that Honduras was only buying eight “Storm Rally” jets from the US for the purpose of detecting drug-trafficking and search-and-rescue activity. The Embassy stressed that the Storm Rally jets, “don’t have any offensive capabilities and have not yet been given to the Honduran government.”

The SAM-7 missiles were purchased by the previous Sandinista government in the ’80s to defend the country against a possible contra or US air attack launched from Honduras. Nicaragua has since destroyed close to 1,000 of the stockpiled missiles at the behest of the US, which claims it fears they could fall into the hands of terrorists and be used to down a commercial airliner.

## **Pay Cut**

President Ortega showed it does not necessarily pay to be President by signing a presidential decree on 22 Jan that slashed his salary in half, to \$3,200 a month, as well as reduced the so-called mega-salaries of his Cabinet members.

The President said the move was part of an administrative effort to cleanup “salary disorder” in the government. He said the \$610,000 that will be saved each month from reduced salaries in the Executive Branch would be spent on youth programs.

The salary of Ortega’s predecessor, Enrique Bolaños, was \$6,200 a month. Ortega’s Vice President, Jaime Morales, will also now receive a reduced salary, of \$3,100, down from \$5,000, and government ministers had their salaries reduced to \$3,000 a month. The salaries of Vice-ministers and directors of state institutions were also reduced.

The decree further states that any government worker making over \$2,770 a month will receive a 10% pay cut.

Ortega also prohibited extra government expenses for the Executive Branch, such as for cell phones, and extra pay for meetings.

The President said he hopes the Legislative Branch will follow his lead and do the same for the National Assembly, where lawmakers make salaries ranging from \$3,221 to \$4,867 a month.

Ortega also announced that he will renounce the lifetime salary he is paid as an ex-President and earmark those funds toward youth programs as well.

—*Tim Rogers*