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NICARAGUA

Ortega President Again

After three lost elections and 17 years out of office, leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) leader Daniel Ortega resumed the presidency of Nicaragua on 10 Jan in an open-air inauguration that drew 14 heads of state, 64 international delegations and hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans.

In the days preceding the event, Nicaragua's capital city of Managua was fortified with thousands of soldiers and police on guard for the transition of power. On 9 Jan, Ortega met with early-arriving dignitaries: Taiwanese President Shen Shui-bian, Spanish Prince Felipe of Asturias, Comptroller General Sergey Vadimovich of the Russian Federation, and US Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt. During the meetings, Ortega publicly reaffirmed Nicaragua's amiable relationship with Taiwan. One of only 24 countries to recognize that nation's sovereignty, Nicaragua ratified a free-trade agreement with Taiwan in Dec, despite objections from Mainland China. Ortega also emphasized his commitment to work cooperatively with the US government.

The presidents of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Bolivia and Venezuela, and representatives of Cuba and Saudi Arabia, also attended the inauguration. Dance performances, crowds waving Sandinista flags and gestures of international solidarity marked the ceremony, which took place in the Omar Torrijos Non-Aligned Nations Plaza in Managua. News reports noted diplomatic fumbles as well.

The inauguration was scheduled for 4:00 pm, but Ortega, wearing shirtsleeves and no tie, was not sworn in until almost two hours later, after the arrival of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who was late because of his own re-inauguration. The plaza was windy, and incoming-National Assembly President René Núñez accidentally placed the traditional presidential banner across Ortega's chest with the seal upside down. (Ortega reportedly made the same mistake when bestowing the banner on Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who beat him in the '90 elections.)

In one of Ortega's first acts as president, he had youth in traditional costumes present the attending Latin American presidents with Medals of Latin American Unity. Chávez and Mexican President Felipe Calderón were left without medals, which prompted Mexican Ambassador Columba Calvo to indignantly demand an explanation. While a children's dance group entertained the crowd, First

Lady Rosario Murillo hastily sought out the missing medals. The young attendants had mistakenly placed them around other guests' necks.

Inspiring surprise and shock in many attendees, former-President Arnold Alemán, who is serving a 20-year sentence under house arrest for corruption and money laundering, secured court permission and appeared at the inauguration with his wife as a special guest of Ortega. He waved at cameras and shouted insults at outgoing-President Enrique Bolaños. Breaking with tradition, Bolaños declined to give a farewell speech and left as soon as the ceremony was over.

After the inauguration ceremony, many of the international delegates returned to their own countries as President Ortega led a procession to the Plaza of Faith, also in Managua, where he gave the first official speech of his term. Reiterating campaign promises to eradicate poverty and illiteracy, which plague 80% and 35% of the population respectively, Ortega criticized neo-liberalism policies, saying that they have not benefited most Nicaraguans. However, he affirmed that the country will not renounce the Dominican Republic and Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) with the US. In Dec, Ortega held informal meetings with members of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but he has not announced whether Nicaragua will seek new loans from those organizations.

Flanked by Chávez and Bolivian President Evo Morales, Ortega also announced plans to join the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a trade agreement between Latin American countries created as a counterweight to US influence in the region. The following day, Ortega enrolled Nicaragua in ALBA, although this decision may still need to be ratified by the National Assembly. Under the agreement, the Venezuelan government plans to forgive more than \$31.8 million in debt and to provide Nicaragua with resources for health, education, agricultural development and infrastructure, including building a petroleum refinery and 200,000 homes for the poor. The Venezuelan government also plans to send Nicaragua a total of 32 portable power generators (some have already arrived in Managua), capable of producing more than 80 megawatts of power, which are expected to be activated in the coming months to help remedy Nicaragua's current energy crisis and recurring blackouts (Vol. 25, Nos. 9, 12).

In the '80s, the US government used economic sanctions and CIA covert operations to destabilize the government of Ortega and the FSLN, which US foreign-policy makers considered dangerously Marxist. In '06, however, Ortega was elected on a platform of reconciliation in which he emphasized his enthusiasm for international cooperation and foreign investment. Although US Ambassador Paul Trivelli publicly opposed Ortega's candidacy, threatening possible economic sanctions if he were to be elected, President George W. Bush called Ortega personally on 8 Jan to congratulate him and wish him luck.

“New Era” Ends in Corruption

When outgoing-President Bolaños assumed office in '02, he spoke of a “new era” for Nicaragua, promising to clean up corruption and bring then-exiting President Alemán to justice for sacking public funds. Five years later, Bolaños “zero-tolerance” administration also closed in a storm of scandal and corruption.

In late Dec, with less than two weeks left of Bolaños' term, a transition team for President-elect Ortega announced that it had detected irregularities and acts of corruption in various government ministries and state businesses.

Néster Delgadillo, the former director of the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), became a prominent personality after the transition team revealed that he had used state funds to pay for personal expenses. Bolaños staunchly defended Delgadillo, saying that he had “borrowed, not stolen” more than \$22,000, which he used to pay for expensive hotels and restaurants, teeth-whitening, corrective-surgery on his nose and personal debts. Delgadillo originally said that he would repay the “loan” by the end of Jan, but on 4 Jan he changed his tune, brazenly contradicting Bolaños, and said flatly that he would not return the money by the end of the month. At this point, Bolaños dismissed him. According to Marvin Hernández, the secretary general of the INEC workers’ union, Delgadillo previously tried to fire 10 employees to cover up his corruption, but he was unable to dismiss employees without just cause.

Another case that came to light involved Pedro Solórzano, the former head of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MTI). From the time Solórzano was appointed in ’02, he left a wake of mismanaged construction projects and deteriorating highways, which always seemed to exceed their budgets. The rehabilitation of the Chinandega-El Guasaule highway, for example, cost \$8 million more than planned and, according to a report by newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*, involved phantom salaries and write-offs to non-existent businesses. An audit by the General Accounting Office of another MTI highway project, Ticuantepe-Masaya-Granada, also revealed that Solórzano committed irregularities. President Bolaños publicly defended Solórzano until the end of his presidency, hiring Solórzano as his political secretary and presenting him with bonuses when he left the MTI.

El Nuevo Diario also reported that former-Director of Migration Fausto Carcabelos, an ally of Bolaños since his days as vice-president during the Alemán administration, permitted immigrants to enter the country without visas. A judicial-department investigation found 29 such cases, and the Attorney General’s office is investigating his suspected connection to human trafficking. The US Embassy recently revoked Carcabelos’ US visa because of alleged corruption.

The director of the Nicaraguan Telecommunications and Postal Institute, Foad Hasson, has admitted that anomalies also exist in one of his offices. The transition team found irregularities with the national lottery and the state water and sewage company as well. Orlando Núñez, a member of the team, said, “There has not been a ministry where we have not found corruption.”

Bolaños has been criticized both for tacitly approving corruption in his government and for his own irregularities. He reportedly earns more than he has claimed, and he continued to take home his pension as an ex-vice president as well as his presidential salary, an issue that was contentious since he took office as president.

Wlifredo Navarro, the vice-president of the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), of which Bolaños was formerly a member, has said that the PLC will demand justice for all corrupt officials, including Bolaños himself. As the FSLN takes the helm, more audits and possible legal action are expected. However, in accordance with the Constitution, Bolaños assumed a parliamentary seat after his presidency, which grants him immunity. To the end of his presidency, Bolaños maintained that his government had been totally transparent, saying that he hoped it will be “an example for future governments.”

Therapeutic Abortion Ban Challenged

On 8 Jan, 67 petitioners—feminists, human rights activists, doctors and professors representing many different organizations—marched to the Supreme Court of Nicaragua to present a motion of unconstitutionality to overturn a recent ban on therapeutic abortion.

In Oct, Nicaragua's National Assembly revoked a 135-year-old law allowing therapeutic abortions when a woman's life is endangered (Vol. 25, No. 11). This change was supported by outgoing-President Bolaños as well as by Ortega (then a presidential candidate). Activists immediately protested the decision and made plans to challenge its constitutionality, threatening to take the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights if necessary.

Protesters say that the law change is unconstitutional because it violates human rights including women's right to life as well as doctors' right to save lives. They also say that the ban compromises Nicaragua's separation of church and state. Nicaragua is one of only a few countries in the world that do not allow therapeutic abortion when a woman's life is at risk. The motion also includes comparisons with therapeutic-abortion legislation in other countries, including Spain, Italy, Colombia and Peru.

On the morning of the march, which was led by the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENDIH), the national police revoked permission, citing security concerns during the days leading up to the transition of presidencies. Nonetheless, petitioners denounced the decision and carried out the march as planned.

Supreme Court Secretary Dr. Enrique Molina received the motion and confirmed that the full court will review it in a timely manner and said that a decision should be made within four months.

In the meantime, activists plan to engage in a public-awareness campaign about the issue and hope to get more than 150,000 people to sign a petition to present to the new National Assembly, demanding that legislators take into account the sentiments of the population.

—*Honna Veerkamp*