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NICARAGUA

Death of a Sandinista Reformer

The unexpected death of presidential hopeful Herty Lewites, of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), has shaken up the country and the national electoral dynamic, with just four months to go before the 4 Nov vote. Lewites, 66, died 2 July of a sudden heart attack, shortly after checking himself into the Vivian Pellas Metropolitan Hospital in Managua for dizziness.

Lewites, the popular and charismatic former Sandinista Mayor of Managua, had a history of heart problems. He had survived a previous heart attack in '02, shortly after being elected mayor.

At the time of his death, Lewites had been polling second in Nicaragua's five-man presidential race, tied at around 21 percentage points with conservative former Finance Minister and banker Eduardo Montealegre of the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN). Former President and Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) candidate Daniel Ortega leads the polls by about five points, according to a CID-Gallup survey published on 29 June.

Well in fourth place, but climbing, is Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) candidate and former Vice-President José Rizo. Former guerrilla leader and revolutionary icon Eden "Comandante Cero" Pastora, running on the ticket of a minority Evangelical party that recently changed its name to the more non-denominational Alternative for Change (AC), is polling last, at around 1%.

Two days after Lewites' death, before the funeral, the MRS quickly promoted its vice-presidential candidate Edmundo "Mundo" Jarquín to presidential candidate. Jarquín, a former Sandinista legislator, economist and international banking consultant, will be joined on the MRS ticket by popular revolutionary singer/songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy, whose fame includes "Nicaragua, Nicaragüita" and the old Sandinista government anthem, which refers to the *yanquis* as the "enemy of humanity"—a lyric he says he does not regret writing.

The MRS is being backed by other Sandinista intellectual dissidents such as Sergio Ramirez, former priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, Dora Maria Tellez and Gioconda Belli, to name a few. The party is urging its supporters to redouble the reform efforts that Lewites represented, and not to jump ship before the elections.

MRS spokesman Luis Carrion said he predicts the party will grow even larger now, rallied together by the spirit of Lewites, who is being hailed as a type of martyr of the reform movement.

Other candidates also have their eyes on Lewites' voters, now that he is gone.

Ortega, who threw Lewites out of the FSLN in Mar '05 for challenging his control over the party, remembered Lewites in death as "a brother." Ortega said the two men had maintained a tight relationship, despite their falling out over the last year.

Lewites, for his part, said earlier last year (before his excommunication from the Church of Daniel) that there was "no difference" between himself and Ortega. "We are foxes from the same den," he said.

Montealegre also chummed up to the spirit of Lewites, saying that they both represented the same struggle against the bipartisan pact represented by Ortega and PLC party boss Arnoldo Alemán, who remains the puppet master from his house arrest.

Fred Denton, CID-Gallup director for Nicaragua, claims that Lewites had taken about six percentage points from Ortega, who is approaching 30% in the polls. If Ortega were able to win back those votes and pick up a couple more from the undecided young population (which leans Sandinista) and women voters (which doesn't), he might get enough to win the presidency in the first round, at the expense of increasingly divided rightwing politicians and voters.

Lights Out, Nicaragua

Nicaragua's already low-energy production has come to a near grinding halt, thanks to emergency power-rationing measures that have reduced the workday to five hours of electricity.

The embattled and scorned Spanish power-distribution company Union Fenosa claims it is running a power-deficit of 40-100 megawatts, prompting them to pull the plug on whole sections of the country for four, five or six hours at a time. Some parts of the country have the lights turned off from 8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., while others have the afternoon or evening blackout shift.

In addition to the announced blackouts, the lights have also been going off sporadically and unannounced during the "on" hours, making people even crazier.

The blackouts have affected every sector of the economy, playing havoc with water services, businesses, traffic lights and even the hospitals.

Union Fenosa claims it is purchasing some surplus energy from Honduras, but that the whole region is in need of power, and surplus energy is hard to come by.

The power-distribution company claims that Nicaragua's old power plants, which are 80% bunker-oil generators, are not producing up to capacity. And the country's main hydroelectric plant is also under-producing due to low water levels.

The Enrique Bolaños administration, meanwhile, came up with the brilliant idea of implementing daylight savings and encouraging folks to buy florescent lights to reduce energy consumption. The government has also started to encourage the development of bio-diesel fuels, which might help to alleviate part of the problem in the next 20-30 years.

In perhaps a not entirely unrelated story, Bolaños ranks as the worst president in the region, with 50% of the population complaining that he is doing a “poor” or “very poor” job as leader, according to a CID-Gallup job-performance survey of Central America and the Dominican Republic.

At the root of the energy problem, according to those in the energy sector, is the fact that Nicaragua—at the behest of the World Bank—implemented some awful energy policies in the past five years, signing long-term contracts with bunker generators, instead of exploring alternative and renewable energy plants, such as geothermal and hydro.

“Nicaragua is paying the price now for past mistakes,” said Erwin Kruger, president of the Supreme Private Business Chamber.

Sandinista Leaders Accused of Genocide

Twenty-five years after what was arguably the darkest chapter in the history of the Sandinista government ('79-'90), some 100 Miskito Indians from the Caribbean Coast on 7 June formally accused six leaders of the FSLN of genocide and crimes against humanity.

The accusations stem from a '81 military operation called “Navidad Roja” (Red Christmas), during which the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) attempted to forcibly relocate thousands of indigenous people along the northern Nicaraguan border, to keep them from becoming sympathizers of the Honduran-based *contra* forces supported clandestinely by the US government.

During the Sandinista military operation, which lasted several months, untold hundreds of Indians were allegedly massacred, raped, detained and disappeared.

Now, standing accused are: former President and Sandinista candidate Daniel Ortega; retired former head of the EPS, Gen. Humberto Ortega; former Minister of the Interior and FSLN founder Tomás Borge; former head of state security Lenín Cerna; former Vice-Minister of the Interior and current Ombudsman Omar Cabezas; and 10 other former Sandinista military advisors and foot soldiers.

The accusation was filed by the Permanent Commission of Human Rights in the Prosecutor’s Office in Puerto Cabezas, a small Caribbean coastal outpost that serves as the capital of the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region.

Commission head Marcos Carmona admitted that he does not have much faith in the local prosecutors’ office, and is subsequently studying the possibility of taking the accusation to an international tribunal.

Ortega, for his part, dismissed the accusation as an election-year tactic to discredit the FSLN and polarize voters.

“What would happen if we all started to compare our lists of the dead?” Ortega said.

Jimmy Carter Warns Against Foreign Influences

Former US President Jimmy Carter traveled to Nicaragua on 3 July for a four-day visit on behalf of The Carter Center to observe the electoral process.

After meeting with four of the five candidates, the head of Supreme Electoral Commission (CSE) and leaders of civil society groups, Carter expressed concerns about the influences of foreign governments on Nicaragua's elections. Carter said he was "vigorously opposed to any foreign intervention in the Nicaraguan electoral process."

He criticized the US government for playing favorites in the upcoming election, and also warned of other foreign influences (Venezuela). "No foreign country should qualify or disqualify any candidate in a sovereign country's election," Carter said. Carter met with each candidate except Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, who declined the meeting for reasons unexplained.

—*Tim Rogers*