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NICARAGUA

Ortega Drops in Polls

After sweeping into office last Jan with a record-high approval rating that seemed to belie the 38% of votes he won in the elections, President Daniel Ortega has dipped dramatically in his job-approval index, according to a CID-Gallup poll released 19 June.

The poll, which claims a 2.8 margin of error, showed that Ortega's job-approval rating plummeted from +50 to -10 in just four months in office. The job-approval index is calculated by subtracting those who say Ortega is doing a "bad job" from those who say he is doing a "good job."

So, whereas 60% of Nicaraguans said President Ortega was doing a "good" job and only 10% disapproved of his performance during his first month in office last Feb, now only 26% qualify his performance as "good," while 36% say it is bad, hence the -10 job rating.

"This is a yellow card for Ortega," said CID-Gallup director Fred Denton. "Ortega was very well received in Jan with great expectations and good will, and that has fluttered away in four months."

Perhaps the most troublesome survey result for the President is that only half of those who identify as Sandinistas—party militants who have stuck with their *comandante* through thick and thin over the last 26 years—say they are pleased with how Ortega is running the country. The poll also found that the number of Nicaraguans who identify as Sandinista has dropped to 36%, which still represents the largest party affiliation in the country.

"Non-Sandinista voters and others who may have supported Ortega in the elections have now gravitated away from this political organization," according to CID-Gallup's analysis.

"The majority of people are saying that this government is not governing democratically and not governing with the best interests of the country in mind," Denton said, citing the poll.

Those findings contrast starkly to the administration's slogans of "more democracy" and "the people are president."

But the public also recognizes some of the early accomplishments of the Ortega government. For example, the majority said that health and education has become more accessible and most said they

did not think that corruption has gotten worse. “People have not given up on this government and they are not rejecting the government or the Sandinistas outright,” Denton said. “But they are dissatisfied with this style of government.”

Corruption Crusade Boomerangs on Bolaños

Former President Enrique Bolaños, who spent the first two years of his administration trying to put his predecessor Arnaldo Alemán behind bars for corruption, is now about to have his own day in court, following a Managua judge’s request on 26 June that the National Assembly strip him of his immunity to face trial for corruption.

Bolaños, 79, was accused on 19 June by the Prosecutor’s Office of covering up an alleged crime committed against the State by his former Immigration Director, Fausto Carcabelos.

Carcabelos also was accused by the Prosecutor’s Office on 19 June of trafficking six undocumented Chinese migrants in Aug ’06. According to the accusation, Carcabelos abused his power 9 Aug ’06 by authorizing the illegal entry into Nicaragua of six undocumented Chinese immigrants, who entered by land from Honduras and were transported to Immigration holding cells where they were “hidden” for five days, without any paper trail, before being let free.

Javier Morazón, special prosecutor for the State’s organized crime unit, said that the investigation of the scandal clearly showed that Nicaraguan Immigration officials had received bribes—a crime, he says, that Bolaños later tried to cover up.

Bolaños is calling the recent criminal accusation filed against him by the Chief Prosecutor’s Office a “political lie” and “revenge” by his adversaries.

Carcabelos was initially suspended when the scandal first broke last year. But when Francisco Fiallos, then Minister of the Interior, recommended that Bolaños permanently remove Carcabelos from his post, the President instead reinstated his embattled Immigration Director.

Fiallos, at the time, ordered an internal audit and police investigation of the scandal. Police, however, found that Immigration records on the computer had been modified, destroyed or deleted, according to the daily, *La Prensa*.

The 25 lawmakers of Alemán’s Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) said they would vote in favor of stripping Bolaños of his immunity, while the 38 Sandinista lawmakers have not yet said how they will vote. The 22 legislators belonging to the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance will most likely vote to protect Bolaños.

Hello Darkness, My Old Friend

Hopes that Nicaragua had turned the corner and was finally recovering from the long winter of its energy-crisis despair have been shattered like dinner plates at a Polish wedding.

Nicaragua’s energy crisis, which resulted in 6-10 hour near-daily blackouts for the second half of ’06, was back in full force in June, with the energy-distribution company Unión Fenosa reporting a 20-30% power deficit. The situation again led to the implementation of rolling blackouts across the country, shutting down whole cities for 6-10 hours at a time.

Some offices in Managua, faced with morning blackouts that make production impossible, changed their normal work hours for employees to 2 pm-8 pm. In cities such as Granada, meanwhile, the blackouts have been scheduled from midnight to 6 am, making fitful and sweaty sleeping conditions in a hot tropical climate without a fan or air-conditioning.

Unión Fenosa claims the energy deficits have ranged from 60-170 megawatt hours in a country whose total demand is about 500 megawatt hours. The embattled energy company has been trying to compensate for the production deficit by purchasing surplus energy from abroad at exorbitant international rates—\$190 per megawatt hour, compared to the normal rate of \$111 per megawatt hour. The company's president, José Ley Lau, said he estimates the company's loss in June to be approximately \$4.5 million, and estimates the same for July.

Sandinista leaders in the past have been very critical of Unión Fenosa, and when Daniel Ortega returned to the presidency earlier this year there was speculation that the Spanish company would be handed its walking papers.

Relations between the company and the government, although still not chummy, appear to have improved somewhat. Even *Comandante* Bayardo Arce, a hardliner Sandinista and economic advisor to Ortega, recently defended Unión Fenosa, saying that the country's energy problems were not the company's fault and had more to do with the producers more than the distributor.

In fact, of the country's 14 power plants, only two are producing at 100% capacity. Of the 571.3 megawatts of installed energy, Nicaragua is only producing about 323.48 megawatts.

The Sandinista government, with the help of revolutionary and oil-rich ally Venezuela, has promised to put to rest Nicaragua's energy problems. The timeframe for that, however, has been slower and more complicated than it appeared during political rallies earlier this year.

Though Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has already donated 60 megawatts of installed energy here—two diesel plants are modestly named after him—the plants are not yet running at full capacity. And the other bunker-burning plants promised by Venezuela and Cuba will not be online until the beginning of next year, according to Unión Fenosa's calculations.

Though the Venezuelan plants are helpful, the problem was enormous to begin with and has gotten worse as older State-run plants have started to fall apart in the meantime. Unión Fenosa says that the new plants will most likely replace the older State plants, rather than adding to Nicaragua's net energy production. But in a time of crisis, even the older plants, which should have been retired years ago, are being run into the ground to produce what they can.

The blackout problems are expected to continue with varying degrees of intensity until the end of the year. By Mar '08, the country's power problems should be mostly resolved. First World, here we come!

Revolutionary Poet, Priest Blasts Ortega

Ernesto Cardenal, famed revolutionary poet, priest and former Minister of Culture during Ortega's first administration, attacked the new Ortega government as being "false Sandinista" and argued that the "real Sandinistas" are those who oppose the government.

Cardenal, during a visit to Mexico in June, also charged that Ortega is being led by his wife, First Lady Rosario Murillo. “This government is a couple, a marriage, where Daniel Ortega is ordered around by his wife,” Cardenal said.

The 82-year-old poet, who defected from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in '95 to join the upstart Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) also accused Ortega of forming ties with the extreme right—former President Arnoldo Alemán, members of the former *contra* and conservative Roman Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo.

—*Tim Rogers*