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NICARAGUA

President Ortega's Popularity Measured

Rebounding after a 16-year slide in the popularity polls, current President Daniel Ortega Saavedra has a monstrous 61% favorability rating, according to a CID-Gallup poll released during the last week of Feb.

The survey, conducted 6-11 Feb, roughly a month into Ortega's presidency, is not a traditional approval-rating poll, says CID-Gallup's director Fred Denton, rather a reflection of the high expectations Nicaraguans have for their new government.

"People are happy that there is a new government and there is a perception among the public that the government is working and making decisions," Denton said.

That perception of forward motion, Denton added, is being welcomed by a population that was fed up with the perceived stagnancy of the previous administration of Enrique Bolaños, who left office last Jan with his tail between his legs.

"Nicaraguans enjoy a strong leader, someone who makes decisions and is *presente*, as they say, even if they don't agree with their way of thinking," Denton said.

Sixty-four percent of those polled said they think Ortega will have a better government than Bolaños did, indicating a strong bipartisan faith in the new administration.

Though Denton stressed that it is too early to measure whether people approve of Ortega's actual job as President, he said the numbers show that the Sandinista leader enjoys a healthy "benefit of the doubt" that transcends party lines.

Even Ortega's unfavorable rating is at an all-time low of 17%, according to the CID-Gallup poll. Ortega, Denton said, is at the "ultimate zenith" of his popularity.

Ortega “Chops Heads” of Corrupt Officials

In what analysts claim is an effort to clean up the Sandinista’s lingering image from the glorious days of “la piñata” in ’90 (when, in the last days of the former Sandinista government, private land, houses and other “presents” were distributed to Sandinista cronies), President Ortega of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) spent the first week of March figuratively “chopping off the heads” of three party politicians who are accused of corruption.

On the chopping block were Judge Roger Camilio Argüello, involved in the mysterious disappearance of \$609,000 in confiscated drug money last year from judicial coffers; Granada Mayor Alvaro Chamorro, who is implicated in a laundry list of financial irregularities in a recent audit by the Comptroller General’s Office; and Ticuantepe Mayor Eduardo López, who is also involved in alleged acts of corruption. Argüello and Chamorro both resigned from office on 5 Mar, while López was told to pack his bags—an order he so far has refused.

Analysts claim that the house cleaning by President Ortega is coming as a top-down order within the FSLN, which is trying to fix its image before the ‘08 municipal elections.

Ortega Rattles Saber at Spanish Power Pirates

President Ortega announced, on 25 Feb, that his administration plans to examine whether embattled Spanish power distribution company Unión Fenosa has been complying with the terms of its franchise contract.

He said the authorities will analyze the firm’s compliance with the contract, signed in ‘00, because “Unión Fenosa is taking a threatening stance and could leave Nicaragua without [electric] light.”

Ortega said that the Spanish firm was threatening the Central American nation by accusing it before the World Bank of allegedly expropriating Unión Fenosa’s investments in the country.

At the end of last year, Unión Fenosa filed an investment claim with the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, part of the World Bank, for \$55 million as a “result of the expropriation of its investment” in Nicaragua, in accordance with Nicaragua’s INE energy institute, the regulatory entity. The Spanish company claims “losses and damages” suffered by Unión Fenosa’s distributors over the last two years, particularly in ’06, when the regulatory agency implemented “disproportionate and unfair” measures against the firm, causing “serious losses and putting its operations at risk.”

Ortega, however, claims it is Unión Fenosa, not the State of Nicaragua, that has failed to uphold its end of the contract. “The accused should be Unión Fenosa because it has not complied with the franchise contract,” Ortega added.

Ortega criticized Unión Fenosa for raising the matter before the World Bank and not waiting for an arbitration decision to be handed down by the INE, which would have established which of the two parties had not fulfilled the conditions of the contract.

The president said that, given the chance that Unión Fenosa could leave Nicaragua without electric power, the authorities had the “obligation to be prepared to avoid that.”

“If they continue acting like they are, the government is going to take the appropriate measures to guarantee that [blackouts] do not occur,” he added.

Ortega said “the problem with Unión Fenosa is a serious one” that started because of the privatizations of public companies carried out by previous administrations in Managua.

During the last six months of '06, Nicaragua experienced near-daily power-rationing blackouts of up to eight hours a day due to a 100-megawatt energy deficit (Vol. 25, Nos. 9, 12).

Score one for Science: The Abortion Controversy Revisited

The heated national debate over the future of therapeutic abortions in Nicaragua has recently started to shift from a religious base to one of science.

Though there was virtually no medical or scientific input on the matter last Nov, when the outgoing National Assembly rushed to pass a law banning all forms of abortion at the behest of the religious right, now that the election has passed and the government has changed there appears to be a new willingness to discuss the matter and listen to expert opinion (Vol. 25, No. 11; Vol. 26, No. 1).

“The climate in the National Assembly, I would say, is one that is for listening to medical criteria and taking the issue out of the religious and ethical debate and making it strictly a scientific one,” said congressman José Pallais, chairman of the legislative judiciary committee. “We think that the issue of therapeutic abortion is an emergency medical situation that shouldn’t be contaminated by other types of discussion.”

Pallais says that while there is no universal consensus in the new Assembly, the lawmakers are “more open to consultation and listening to the scientific position to make a better decision based more on science.”

That apparent openness to science marks a 180-degree reversal from the former National Assembly, which passed the law without any scientific or medical consultation. The rush legislation, which makes Nicaragua one of five countries in the world to ban abortion to save a mother’s life, has been blasted by international human rights groups, the European Union and the rest of the enlightened world.

The reform outlawing abortion was met by a flurry of challenges before the Supreme Court by human rights groups that argue the ban violates women’s constitutional right to life and health, as well as a number of international human-rights accords that Nicaragua has written directly into its *magna carta*.

On 14 Feb, the Supreme Court announced that it was accepting 32 of the 33 motions for study, and started a process of consultation with both medical and religious experts. If the Supreme Court rules that the abortion ban is unconstitutional, it will be lifted immediately, independently of the National Assembly’s new openness to listen to all sides.

Included in the new spirit of openness to science is Roman Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, who has said he thinks it would be “convenient” to continue with an open panel or forum to “hear the scientists, medical experts and lawyers.”

Tomás Borge: To Peru or Bust

Legendary Sandinista Comandante and party founder Tomás Borge announced in Feb that the Peruvian government has accepted his nomination to serve as Nicaragua’s Ambassador to Lima, and

that he will be resigning his congressional seat and post as assistance secretary general in the FSLN to move to South America to serve out his final days abroad.

Borge, 76, said he was leaving to be with his wife, who is Peruvian, and his children who live there. “I calculate that I have about seven years left to live, and I want to spend that time with my children,” the former *comandante* said.

Borge’s wife reportedly left Nicaragua a year ago to move back to Peru with the children, after the kids allegedly received threats in Nicaragua.

A former revolutionary leader and then hard-line Minister of the Interior during the ’80s, Borge, is the last living founder of the FSLN, organized as a Marxist-inspired guerrilla movement in ’61.

As the number-two ranked FSLN leader behind President Ortega, Borge is still considered a firebrand member of the old guard, despite having softened somewhat in recent years as the head of the congressional commission on tourism.

Borge is rumored to have a rocky relationship with First Lady Rosario Murillo. Though publicly, Borge denies problems with Murillo, the aging Sandinista founder has played a noticeably less-visible role within the party leadership in recent years, while Murillo has played a more powerful role.

Borge’s announcement that he will be shipping off to Peru has some wondering if the move is at least somewhat politically motivated.

“This is a good opportunity to quiet Borge,” said political observer Cirilo Otero. “He is an historic figure within the FSLN, but he says things that bother others and that are not always consistent with the party line.”

—*Tim Rogers*