

MESOAMERICA

Volume 25, Number 9, September 2006



NICARAGUA

Ortega Widens Lead

Presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), has widened his lead by more than five points over pro-business challenger Eduardo Montealgre, of the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), heading into the homestretch of the 5 Nov elections, according to a CID Gallup poll released 28 Aug.

The poll, which puts Ortega at the head of the five-man race with 29%, indicates that the former revolutionary president and US nemesis has doubled his favorability since his third place ranking of 14% in a poll last Nov.

Currently polling second is Montealgre with 23%, followed by a two-way tie for third between José Rizo of the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) and Edmundo Jarquín of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), each with 14%. In a distant fifth, and tied with the category “other,” is former guerrilla leader Edén “Comandante Cero” Pastora, who is polling at 1% on the ticket of the Evangelical minority party Alternative for Change (AC).

The 28 Aug poll, which surveyed 1,258 Nicaraguan voters in their homes, also shows that 19% of the population is still undecided, down from 35% last Nov.

In the past, the undecided voters have teamed up with other anti-Sandinista voters to defeat Ortega at the last moment. Ortega, since being voted out of office in '90, has lost two subsequent elections, despite leading in the polls in '00, prior to his most recent defeat to current President Enrique Bolaños.

However, CID Gallup notes that, if the 19% of undecided voters is eliminated from the most recent poll, Ortega finishes with more than 35% of the vote, besting Montealgre by 8 points and winning the presidency in the first round—something Ortega has been promising to do for some time.

Under Nicaragua's Electoral Code, which was reformed by Ortega's pen as a product of his nefarious power-sharing pact with PLC party boss Arnoldo Alemán, a candidate only needs 35% of the vote, plus a five point advantage over the second-place finisher, to win the presidency in the first

round. In most countries with runoff elections, the minimum threshold to win in the first round is 40-45%.

The polls indicate that Ortega's only chance of winning is in the first round; in a runoff the forecast is that the Sandinista strongman would lose to either Montealegre, Jarquín or Rizo.

Though the wildcard undecided voters normally galvanize against Ortega on election day, PLC candidate Rizo—curiously enough—has shown the most increase as “the candidate I could never vote for,” according to CID Gallup. Rizo, who many view as a lackey for incarcerated former President Alemán, increased 6 points in the “I never” category, representing one-fourth of population that dislikes him strongly.

Still, none of the candidates have a 50% approval rating—indicating a growing overall disenchantment with the political class.

Efforts by the U.S. to unite the so-called Liberal family, or “democratic forces,” under the tent of Montealegre also appear to be failing. Montealegre, who is embroiled in a congressional investigation into a national banking scandal from '00, has been calling on the Liberals from the PLC to unite with his party to defeat Ortega and the “pacto.”

Rizo countered by paying for a TV address to the nation on 30 Aug, during which he invited all of Montealegre's supporters to join his campaign. Rizo insists that only the PLC has the party structure necessary to defeat the Sandinistas.

Montealegre then accused Rizo of being involved in a plot to divide the Liberals and hand victory to Ortega. “The leadership of the PLC continues to act in a way to divide the vote and facilitate a victory for Daniel Ortega; for this reason, only a union around the ALN can save Nicaragua,” said Montealegre's spokesman, Rafael Cordova in 4 Sep press release.

The MRS, meanwhile, is denying rumors that they are in the campaign only to make themselves known with sights on the '11 elections. Some political analysts have argued that Jarquín and the MRS, though leading the polls in Managua, are not in it to win, but are planning to form a second-round pact with Montealegre in exchange for representation in his government.

MRS president, Dora María Tellez, said she is “satisfied” with the party's current polling, and thinks they are well positioned to work toward electoral victory in the next two months. She dismissed rumors of alliance as propaganda by the FSLN and ALN, and said “we haven't even thought about '11.”

Strangest of Bedfellows

The left-wing FSLN has bedded with its former enemies, the Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN) of late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, in an electoral pact with an eye toward winning the 5 Nov vote.

Sandinistas and Somocistas—who faced off in the civil war that left more than 75,000 dead in the '70s and '80s—sealed the deal on 26 Aug with an embrace between Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega and PLN chief Constantino Velásquez.

Velásquez said that the PLN had joined with the Sandinistas because he was sure that the “Sandinista Front is the only ... true option for taking Nicaragua forward,” adding that the two political groupings could not “continue with the politics of hate and terror” and emphasizing that there do exist areas of agreement between their two mostly divergent government platforms.

The PLN, a minority party of only symbolic significance, was formerly the ally of the PLC, headed by former President Arnaldo Alemán ('97-'02). The party's pact with the Sandinistas has been dismissed by the PLC as opportunist.

Things that go Bump in the Dark

Embattled energy-distributor Unión Fenosa could be left in the dark following an arbitration case brought against it by the Nicaraguan government for alleged contract violations.

Unión Fenosa claims it is “confident” it will win the case—expected to be resolved sometime early next year—but voices are growing for the Spanish company's ouster over a grinding energy crisis that has led to power-rationing blackouts for months.

The case was brought against Unión Fenosa on 16 Aug by the Nicaraguan Energy Institute (INE), the state regulatory agency. INE claims the company has failed to provide quality service to the company's 600,000-plus users.

The case came at a time of growing street protests against power-rationing blackouts, which reached a new low in mid-Aug with daily power cuts lasting up to 11 hours.

The power-distribution woes were temporarily mollified by the end of Aug, with surplus energy purchased from other Central American countries. But the pressure against Unión Fenosa has not let up.

On 24 Aug, the Comptroller General's Office, in response to mounting complaints filed by the Consumer Defense Network, called for the annulment of the concession awarded to Unión Fenosa back in June of '00 for “incompliance with contractual obligations.”

The Comptroller General requested that the Attorney General's Office open legal proceedings to revoke the company's operating license in Nicaragua. The Supreme Court too has asked President Enrique Bolaños to provide a report on the details surrounding the presidential decree he issued in '00 to clear the way for the privatization of energy distribution. Bolaños, who has been intimately involved in the country's energy policies for nearly a decade as head of the National Energy Commission and then as President, continues to defend Unión Fenosa, arguing that “the worst thing Nicaragua could do” would be to run the company out of the country.

The Consumer Defense Network, meanwhile, wants Unión Fenosa's contract annulled and for the government to nationalize energy distribution services.

—Tim Rogers