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“Dan the Man” Still Running the Show in Nicaragua

In the Punch and Judy Show that is Nicaraguan politics, Daniel Ortega is the undisputed puppet master.

The Sandinista secretary general and former revolutionary president remains Nicaragua’s leading powerbroker, wielding considerable control over the judicial system (stacked with judges he appointed during the ’80s), the unions (stacked with cronies he appointed in the ’90s) and the Supreme Electoral Council (stacked with magistrates he appointed in the ’00s).

Despite being voted out of power in ’90, and losing two subsequent elections since, Ortega refuses to go quietly into the night. On the contrary, he continues to plot, politic, jockey and bully himself into new positions of influence, effectively consolidating power below the president’s throne, waiting for his day to return.

Many Nicaraguans—as well as the international community—have expressed growing exasperation with Ortega’s staying power. He consistently polls as one of the two least popular politicians in Nicaragua, ranking neck and neck with his arch-enemy-turned proverbial *pacto* bed buddy, Arnoldo Alemán.

Most Nicaraguans, surveys show, and all but a few North American expatriates want Ortega to retire from politics, and can’t seem to understand why he’s still around despite his apparent unpopularity.

But Ortega has a plan, which—like him or not—is quiet savvy, and perhaps good enough to get him back into the nation’s highest elected post someday.

Ortega first announced his plan 27 Feb ’90, two days after losing the election to Violeta Chamorro’s UNO coalition.

In his concession speech, called “The Revolution Cannot be Stopped,” Ortega said: “There will come a day when we return to govern from the top, (but for now) the Sandinista National Liberation Front, with the people of Nicaragua, will continue to govern from below.”

Since then, Ortega has stuck to the plan of governing from below. And the Sandinista leader, contrary to what his critics may think, is a very apt and clever politician – a fact that is belied by the last three election results.

Ortega does not make moves or give speeches randomly; virtually everything he does is a calculated element of his plan. Even when the logic of his actions doesn’t seem to make immediate or apparent sense, time usually reveals the reason behind his move.

Perhaps the first example of this was when Ortega, in late '98, secretly approached then President Arnaldo Alemán and laid the groundwork for what would later become the now-infamous power-sharing agreement known as “el pacto.”

The pact carved up the Supreme Electoral Council, the Comptroller General's Office and the Supreme Court as political patronage, as well as passed a new Electoral Law that consolidated bipartisanship between Ortega's Sandinistas and Alemán's Liberals. Enrique Bolaños, after being elected President in '01, declared a war on corruption, and put Alemán in jail—for allegedly bilking the government out of \$100 million—to show everyone just how serious he was.

But Bolaños' anti-corruption crusade was only successful as long as Ortega allowed it to be. It was Sandinista judge Juana Mendez who put Alemán behind bars, and it later became clear that the “fat man”—as he's known—would only stay behind bars as long as that arrangement was convenient for Ortega. Bolaños' war on corruption also was only allowed to continue as long as Ortega allowed it to, before he boomeranged it back on the President (the Ortega-controlled Comptroller General's Office late last year charged that it had evidence that Bolaños, who used to be Alemán's vice president, used some of the same embezzled money to fund his '01 campaign).

So, in effect, Ortega cooperated with Alemán to form the pact, then cooperated with Bolaños to put Alemán behind bars, and now is cooperating again with Alemán to pressure Bolaños with jail time, while using Alemán's freedom as leverage to negotiate anything he wants from the Liberal Party boss.

Ortega has already shown that he is willing to pull Alemán out of house arrest whenever it is most politically convenient for him to have the hefty Liberal boss back on the streets and in the game.

Ortega, despite being one of the least popular candidates heading into the '06 elections, will do everything in his power during the next year to position himself as the favorite candidate, if not popularly, at least logistically.

Despite losing the last three elections, Ortega has won roughly 40% of the vote in each contest—five percentage points less than the old electoral law required for a first-round victory. So Ortega, with Alemán's help, passed a new Electoral Law in '00, changing the minimum to 40%, with the stipulation that a candidate could win with 35% if the second vote-getter got less than 30% of the vote.

In a two-candidate race—as has been the case in Nicaragua in its first three democratic elections—the winner (whoever's not Ortega) has won more than 45% of the vote. But with several horses in the race, the more divided the vote would be, and the chances of the next President being elected with less than 40% of the vote increases.

Ortega—who historically has only been able to muster some 40% of the vote, but also seems to be able to count on a solid 35% from the diehard, life-long Danielistas—has done the math and knows that the more candidates who run, the better are his chances of winning. In other words, as long as the anti-Ortega vote is divided such that none of his challengers win 30% of the vote, Dany thinks he can take it.

That mathematical possibility has led cynics to believe that popular Sandinista challenger and former Managua mayor Herty Lewites—who will be running on the ticket of a minority party—is secretly

collaborating with Ortega to divide the opposition vote between left and right, allowing the FSLN to return to power.

The US has done the math, too. And it doesn't like the numbers.

Determined, as always, to prevent Ortega from returning to power, the US sent Oliver Garza, the former hard-line US Ambassador to Nicaragua, back to Managua last month to try to bring together on the same ballot popular right-wing candidates José Antonio Alvarado and Eduardo Montealegre. Divided, the two threaten to split the anti-Ortega vote (along with Lewites on the right). But together, Uncle Sam hopes, the two Liberal dissidents could form a formidable ticket

Ortega, of course, realizes what the US is trying to do, and appears to be prepared to play the Alemán card at the most opportune moment. Ortega realizes that a "new Liberal Alliance" under new, gringo-friendly leadership will be very difficult if Alemán, the Liberal's party boss, is out and about and able to seek his wrath on Montealegre and Alvarado—both of whom he has thrown out of his party for being less than blindly loyal to him.

So once again, Alemán could help serve Ortega's political aspirations, if allowed out of jail to mix things up. The US realizes this and has responded by putting pressure on the Alemán family by canceling their US visas and filing a civil case against Alemán in Miami for allegedly using \$700,000 in stolen Nicaraguan state funds to buy US bank certificates. The US has also come out strongly in recent months against the Nicaraguan court system, which it claims is controlled by Ortega.

While admittedly anything can happen in the nutty world of Nicaraguan politics, one thing is for certain: Ortega will have the deck stacked in his favor by election-day, in hopes of fulfilling his plan of one day returning to govern from above.

—*Tim Rogers*