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COUNCILS OF CITIZEN POWER

The Sandinista administration's promise to establish a "direct democracy" is turning out to be a thin veil for a top-down authoritative model aimed at entrenching party control on all levels of government and society, warns a growing group of government critics.

The Debate over Citizen Councils

The cornerstone of the Sandinistas' "new revolution" is the creation of so-called Councils of Citizen Power (CPC), which are currently being organized in every municipality and neighborhood throughout the country under the direct coordination of First Lady Rosario Murillo. The citizen councils, according to Murillo, would empower communities with local decision-making authorities to allow people to design their own government programs and policies, making good on the Sandinista promises of "more democracy" and "the people are president."

Critics, however, note that similar councils known as "Municipal Development Councils" already exist under the Law of Citizen Participation, and argue that the new Sandinista councils are being used as a way for Murillo and President Daniel Ortega to consolidate their party's apparatus and influence throughout the country, under the guise of civil society.

"These organizations are party structures, not civil society," Carlos Tunnermann, a former Sandinista and leading civil-society intellectual, told *The Nica Times* in early Aug.

Other civic groups agree. In July, 19 different civil-society organizations banded together to release a joint-statement alerting citizens "to not let themselves be manipulated with false promises that will divide us and lead to a catastrophic future ... a return to the dictatorships of the past."

"The so-called direct democracy is a manipulation by the government to impose the Councils of Citizen Power, cut from the party mold and coordinated by the political secretaries of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)," reads the joint statement. "This [model] does not match with the representative and participative democracy established by our Constitution. Its real goal is to manipulate and control the people."

Opposition political leaders also have come out against the Citizen Councils by arguing that the Sandinistas are trying to impose parallel government structures to undermine the democratically elected municipal governments, almost half of which are controlled by opposition parties.

The Sandinistas, however, insist that the citizen councils are about empowering the people to participate more fully in government. Those who are against the councils, Sandinista boosters argue, are afraid of a true democracy.

“The political will of President Daniel is to share the presidency with the people,” Murillo, the official government spokeswoman, said during a recent interview with Sandinista-controlled media. “We are servants of the people because it’s the people who are really in the presidency. And how does this translate into daily life? Through the creation of the Councils of Citizen Power.”

Murillo explained that the Citizen Councils would have no more than 100 participants each. The plan, according to Murillo, is to organize 20,000 councils across the country to operate as local forums for citizens to discuss community problems, issues and solutions.

Though the councils are being organized in each municipality by FSLN political secretaries—or appointed party delegates—the Sandinistas insist they are inclusive of all parties and viewpoints in a spirit of national reconciliation.

The councils will operate in a hierarchical structure, with local councils on issues such as health, education, sports, citizen security and development reporting to a neighborhood “cabinet.” The organizational structure would be similar on municipal and departmental levels, which would eventually report to Murillo, who heads the councils on a national level. Murillo, in theory, then reports to Ortega and his ministers.

The citizen councils, according to Murillo, “will ensure that [government] programs come from the communities, and are not programs that are designed from the top-down by technicians or cold specialists who use mathematical calculations. Policies, programs and proposals have to be made by the individuals who make up the community, the family we know as Nicaragua.”

Which Way is Up?

While Murillo insists that the citizen councils will be a way to empower the masses and strengthen grass-roots democracy, critics warn that the councils are an elaborate system of mirrors meant to create the illusion of citizen power.

Tunnermann argues that the citizen councils are being organized secretly by local Sandinista political secretaries who are stacking the organizations with party loyalists. The councils, therefore, will create the illusion of decision-making on a grass-roots level, but in reality they will only serve as “echo chambers” for decisions made from above by Murillo and Ortega, Tunnermann charged.

Alejandro Bravo, one of the original authors of the '03 Law of Citizen Participation (Law 475), notes that Murillo’s citizen councils were created under the authority of Law 290, the Law of Organization, Jurisdiction and Procedures of the Executive Branch, rather than the law he helped pen to facilitate citizen participation.

As a result, he said, from a legal framework, it would appear the councils are meant to answer to the Executive Branch, rather than the government answering to the councils.

“The danger,” Bravo said, “is that these councils become mechanisms for the party to hear an echo of its own voice, rather than a plurality of voices.”

Instead of decentralizing government authority and increasing democracy, which was the intention of the Law of Citizen Participation, the Sandinista citizen councils could be used to centralize power, Bravo warned.

“Remember that Napoleon appointed political bosses in different regions to answer to the Emperor,” Bravo said. “Napoleon said, ‘the revolution is me’.”

The leadership style of the former French emperor is not the only international model of government to which people have compared the new Sandinista citizen councils. Civil society leaders argue that the citizen councils are mirrored on the authoritarian models of Fidel Castro’s Cuba and Hugo Chávez’ Venezuela.

Others, meanwhile, fear that the councils harken back to the days of the infamous Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS)— neighborhood “watch groups” set up by the Sandinista government in the ’80s to help “defend the revolution” and sniff out traitors.

“The population says that it doesn’t want to return to the past, to the decade of the ’80s, by establishing the Committees of Citizen Power, which have already become known as the Committees of Citizen Persecution,” said opposition political leader Eduardo Montealegre.

Benefit of the Doubt

Those who have been involved in the implementation of the citizen councils on a technical level claim that they are more diverse than critics and the media have been making them out to be.

One source close to the process said that one of the “redeeming elements” of the citizen councils in Managua is that they are involving people from all walks of life, including young professionals, members of opposition parties and other well-to-do folk who are traditionally averse to participating in political organizations.

Jorge Trinidad, 30, is a Liberal from a Liberal family but accepted the invitation to participate in the citizen council formed in his community in Managua. He says that so far he has found the council in his community to be a pluralistic and “open” organization that has tried to include representatives of different ideologies.

“They asked me to participate in the council on sports and I told them I was also interested in participating on the council of budget proposal, and they said that was no problem and that they would be open to my suggestions and positions,” Trinidad said. “Some people are saying that the councils are going to be like the old CDS and will serve as a way for Daniel to maintain power, but in my community I don’t see it that way.”

In the north of the country and in the rural autonomous regions where the counterrevolutionary conflict in the ’80s was most intense, there reportedly has been more resistance to the councils, which are viewed suspiciously as Sandinista organizations.

Some of the greatest tensions, however, have come from Sandinista mayors. A source close to the process of implementing the councils told *The Nica Times* that in some cases personal power struggles between the Sandinista political secretaries and Sandinista mayors have led to power tussles in Sandinista municipalities.

“In some cases, the Sandinista political secretaries ran against the Sandinista mayor in the ’04 primaries and lost the election, and now they are using the citizen councils as a form of revenge,” said the source, who spoke on the condition that his name be withheld.

United Opposition

In a rare show of unity, the oft-bickering opposition parties in the legislative National Assembly have pledged to unite to defeat the citizen councils.

Congressman Victor Hugo Tinoco, a congressional leader for the opposition left-wing Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), told *The Nica Times* that there are 50 opposition votes between the MRS, the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance and the Liberal Constitutional Party that are dedicated to voting in favor of a bill to reform the Law 290 so that all organization of citizen councils must occur under the authority of the Law of Citizen Participation, and not under the direct command of the Executive Branch.

“The Constitution establishes the rights of any group to organize to try to influence government, but those groups cannot be converted into government institutions with state functions,” said Tinoco, a former Sandinista hardliner who was thrown out of the FSLN in ’05 for not supporting Ortega’s candidacy.

The Sandinistas, however, feel strongly about the citizen councils; and it will be unlikely that they will give them up without a fight. “Sandino lives in the Councils of Citizen Power,” Murillo said recently.

Congressman Tinoco, however, says the end of the citizen councils is near. “We have the votes and we are going to do this, but it will probably take a couple of weeks to go through all the channels,” he said optimistically.

—*Tim Rogers*

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