

## Political Developments

### *Venezuelan Interest in Nicaragua*

On April 25, Managua's Mayor Dionisio Marengo, on behalf of the Sandinista-dominated Nicaraguan Association of Municipalities (AMUNIC), signed an oil supply agreement with the Venezuelan state oil company *Petróleo de Venezuela del Caribe* (PDVSA). PDVSA will reportedly sell oil at preferential rates and allow for deferred payment of up to 40 percent of the cost of petroleum for up to 25 years. The deal is part of Venezuela's Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which is President Hugo Chávez' sponsored alternative to the U.S. proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). Venezuelan support to Nicaragua also includes free eye surgery and fertilizer under favorable terms to a group of Sandinista-linked agricultural organizations. The oil deal has drawn criticism from the Nicaraguan Government, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*, PLC) and independent presidential candidates Eduardo Montealegre and Herty Lewites who argue that Chávez is planning to indirectly fund Daniel Ortega's presidential candidacy for the November 5 presidential elections. Representatives of Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) have denied the charges, saying the oil discount would be passed on to their communities.

### *Political Party Alliances*

Charges against Chávez' support to Ortega's campaign follows weeks of criticism of U.S. interference in local politics. The Sandinistas accused the U.S. Ambassador of intervening in Nicaragua's electoral process when he offered technical and financial support to Liberal political party leaders and presidential candidates to organize intra-party primaries in an effort to unite the Liberals. In a parallel effort to unite the Liberal parties, Former President of El Salvador Armando Calderón Sol has been shuttling back and forth between the PLC and ALN. PLC representatives have made it clear that José Rizo's presidential candidacy is not negotiable. The Liberal Nicaraguan Alliance's – Conservative Party (*Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense – Partido Conservador*, ALN-PC) presidential candidate Montealegre reiterated his stance that he will not form an alliance with the PLC while Arnoldo Alemán still controls the party. According to the electoral calendar, political parties need to register alliances by May 12 and presidential and National Assembly candidates by May 31. The latest Cid-Gallup poll published in *La Prensa* on April 19<sup>th</sup> showed Montealegre in the lead with 22 percent of voter preference, followed by Lewites with 18 percent, Ortega with 16 percent and Rizo with 13 percent.

## NDI Program Activities

Surveys implemented by the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) local partners show that more than a third of Nicaraguans are at risk of being disenfranchised in the November 2006 elections, a percentage that could influence the outcome of closely-contested presidential and legislative races. To address this problem, the CSE needs to take effective steps to ensure that

eligible Nicaraguans have the opportunity to vote. Delays in issuing identification cards could preclude otherwise eligible voters from being included on the final voter registration list. This lack of access to the electoral process would not only undermine conditions for credible and fair elections but could have an effect on electoral outcomes.

The following NDI programs in support of Nicaraguan efforts to ensure a fair democratic process are funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Royal Embassy of Denmark.

## **1. Unified Approach to Election Observation**

### ***Two-Way Voter Registry Audits***

NDI is supporting efforts to ascertain the reliability of the voter registration lists through two-way audits. This entails: 1) selecting a national random sample of names and addresses of persons on the voter registration list and contacting those people; and 2) contacting a random sample of eligible voters (Nicaraguan citizens 16 years and older) on the street, and determining what proportion of these people are on the final voter registration list. NDI is currently working with the internationally recognized election observer organization Ethics and Transparency (*Ética y Transparencia*, ET) and a well-respected team of scholars from the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana*, UCA)<sup>1</sup> to establish a baseline for an audit of the national voter registry using the voter list from the last nation-wide municipal elections in 2004. As of April 30, voter registry data had been collected, entered and processed. In May, NDI will work with ET and UCA to interpret the audit results, and present key findings and recommendations to the Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral*, CSE), political parties, civic organizations, international donor representatives and the media. Combined with the Atlantic Coast audit, the national audit is designed to keep pressure on the CSE to improve the voter registration list for the national elections.

### ***National Identification Assessment***

NDI is also working with ET and UCA to determine problems related to the distribution of national identification cards by recruiting 600 citizens who have applied for a national identification card to: a) track how quickly identification cards are obtained; b) identify the reasons for any delays; and c) determine whether there is any partisan and/or regional bias in the issuance of identification cards. ET and UCA are working to ensure that all participants have taken the necessary steps to apply for their national identification cards. In May, NDI will work with ET and UCA to draft an intermediate report on key obstacles limiting citizens' rights to national identification and the ballot. By systematically identifying obstacles to obtaining an identification card, the assessment will serve to inform advocacy groups seeking to target their efforts at enabling citizens to exercise their human right to nation identification, which is critical not only to voting but also day-to-day activities such as obtaining employment or taking legal actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior researchers at the University of Central America (*Universidad Centro Americana*, UCA) are serving as technical advisors to ET for the national identification assessment and voter registry audit.

## **2. Increasing Voter Participation through Advocacy Efforts**

### *Citizen Assistance Centers (CACs)*

NDI is also working with the advocacy group Movement for Nicaragua (*Movimiento por Nicaragua*, MpN) to improve citizens' access to and information about the national identification card process and enable more citizens to participate in the upcoming election. Since February, youth representatives of MpN have assisted more than 2,000 citizens in obtaining birth certificates and fulfilling other requirements to obtain a national identification card through its Citizen Assistance Center (CAC) at the Roberto Huembes Market in Managua, with support from the U.S. Embassy. NDI plans to support MpN efforts to expand this activity outside of Managua. Through the CACs, Nicaraguan citizens will be provided with information and forms to apply to the CSE for the national identification card necessary to cast a ballot on election day. The citizens will also have access to free legal assistance in obtaining birth certificates, and on-site photographs and photocopies. NDI is currently working with MpN to develop a tracking database and database friendly forms.