

Political Developments

Candidate Selection

The May 31 candidate registration deadline marked the end of the first chapter of the Nicaraguan electoral process. The November 5 elections will pit former president and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega and former vice president and Liberal party member José Rizo against dissidents from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) and the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*, PLC) parties—Herty Lewites and Eduardo Montealegre—among other candidates.¹ In the days leading up to the candidate registration deadline, rumors emerged that the PLC presidential and vice presidential candidates Rizo and José Alvarado had threatened to resign over disagreements about the composition of the National Assembly candidate list. Top positions were given to individuals who had demonstrated their political loyalty to former president Arnoldo Alemán, currently under house arrest for corruption-related crimes. Charges have also been brought against Alemán in Panama and the United States, and he was recently banned from entering 15 European countries for the next ten years.

Public Opinion Polls

Three out of four public opinion surveys show Ortega at the top of political party candidate preferences. A May 18 poll by *Borge & Asociados* shows Ortega and Montealegre in a near-draw, placing Ortega in the lead with 28.4 percent of voter preferences, followed by Montealegre with 26.5 percent, Rizo in third place with 17.1 percent and Lewites in fourth place with 14.8 percent.² A second poll by *M&R Consultores*, released on May 29, also shows a tie between Ortega and Montealegre, placing Ortega in the lead with 27.9 percent, followed by Montealegre with 27.2 percent. Unlike the poll by *Borge & Asociados*, the M&R poll shows Lewites in third place with 17.9 percent and Rizo in fourth place with 13.3 percent.³ Meanwhile, the Cid – Gallup poll, commissioned by a group of Central American business executives, shows Ortega in the lead with 26.1 percent, Montealegre in second place with 22 percent, Lewites with 17.2 percent and Rizo with 12 percent.⁴ Finally, a fourth poll by the U.S. firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, released on May 30, shows Lewites in the lead with 28 percent, followed closely by Montealegre with 27 percent, Ortega with 26 percent and Rizo with 14 percent.⁵

To win in the first round, a presidential candidate must obtain 40 percent of the vote or 35 percent plus a five-point margin over the nearest rival (Election Law Article 145). With four strong

1 Four alliances and a small political party will compete for the presidential and legislative elections, including the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*, PLC), the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN), the Liberal Nicaraguan Alliance – Conservative Party (*Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense – Partido Conservador*, ALN-PC), the Sandinista Renewal Movement (*Movimiento Renovador Sandinista*, MRS) and the Christian Alternative Party (*Partido Alternativa Cristiana*, AC).

2 “Empate Ortega-Montealegre,” *La Prensa*, May 18, 2006.

3 “Montealegre ganaría en segunda vuelta,” *La Prensa*, May 29, 2006.

4 “La pelea es entre Ortega y Montealegre,” *La Prensa*, June 3 2006.

5 “No me dejaré robar elecciones,” *El Nuevo Diario*, May 30, 2006.

candidates running—two in a direct challenge to the two party system that has dominated Nicaraguan politics for years—the possibility of a second round looms large.

CSE Quorum and Legal Framework

On May 23, Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral*, CSE) magistrates signed an accord to meet quorum throughout the electoral process. Quorum at the CSE is met by five of the seven magistrates, which include three members from each of the two major parties and a “consensus” president, Roberto Rivas. Since the eve of the March 5 Atlantic Coast regional elections, the PLC had boycotted the CSE, leaving it without a quorum, and resulting in an impasse which has prevented the electoral authority from functioning normally. In its third report on the Nicaraguan electoral process, the Carter Center highlighted this problem and urged the magistrates to make an effort to resolve their differences. The Carter Center also called for “progressive clarification and fortification of the rules of the game as the only way to maximize the confidence.”⁶ According to the national election observation group Ethics and Transparency (*Ética y Transparencia*, ET), there are four election law articles that require clarification, additional regulation, and/or deserve special attention, including: 1) Articles 41 and 116, which establish the right to vote of citizens whose names do not appear on the voters’ list but who have a valid voter ID card; 2) Article 162, which establishes the parameters for which a polling station can be annulled; and 3) Article 147, which establishes the method for seat allocation in the National Assembly.⁷

Program Activities

Charges of fraud marred the 2004 municipal elections, deepening public doubts regarding the CSE. Most Nicaraguans now perceive the CSE as a partisan barrier to fair elections. A central aspect of the CSE’s work is to oversee the creation of the voter registration list, which is based on the national identification card system that is also administered by the CSE. Surveys implemented by NDI’s local partners show that more than a third of Nicaraguans are at risk of being disenfranchised in the November elections, a percentage that could influence the outcome of closely-contested presidential and legislative races. In partnership with Nicaraguan civil society partners and with support from USAID, NED, and the Danish Embassy, NDI is conducting a national election monitoring and voter identification campaign program to help safeguard the elections. Elements include:

Two-Way Voter Registry Audits

NDI provided assistance to the Institute for Development and Democracy (*Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia*, IPADE) to audit the voter registry list for the March 5 regional elections on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast. This audit showed that one in five eligible voters was not on the voter registry and that 42 percent of the information in the registry was flawed. NDI is now working with ET and the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana*, UCA) to audit the national voter registry and press for solutions. Preliminary data show that 16.6 percent of eligible voters are not on the voter registry and that 18.8 percent of the information in the registry is outdated, meaning that citizens no longer live at the indicated address or have passed away. Furthermore, in 10.3 percent of all cases, the data from the Center-Pacific region voter registration list are completely inaccurate, meaning that no one in the community has heard of the individual,

⁶ “Third Report on the Nicaraguan Election Process,” The Carter Center, May 10, 2006.

⁷ “Sexto Informe de Observación Electoral de las Elecciones 2006,” *Ética y Transparencia*, May 10, 2006.

the individual never lived there, or the address does not exist. This level of outdated information is equivalent to that in the Atlantic Coast region (9.9 percent). NDI advisors worked with ET to draft a report and finalize a strategy to present key findings and recommendations to the CSE, political parties, civic organizations, international donor representatives and the media. ET will present the report on June 8 and 9.

National Identification Assessment

NDI is also working with ET and UCA to identify specific problems and propose solutions to the distribution of national identification cards required for voting. As of May 5, ET had collected information from a total of 600 participants from 15 departments as well as the two Autonomous Regions of the North and South, all of whom had obtained a “*colilla*,” or receipt indicating that the participant had applied for an identification card. The sample only includes participants who applied for an ID card by May 5 in order to track their progress within the remaining three month period (ending August 6) allowed by law to respond to applications. ET is currently investigating 120 participant cases where applicants were told by election authorities to return in five or six months to pick up their ID card. Preliminary data indicate that those persons most affected by obstacles in the ID card application process are young and live in rural areas. Additionally, costs in time and money to obtain an ID card are prohibitive, particularly for those who do not have birth certificates since their costs can multiply up to five times. ET anticipates presenting the preliminary national identification card assessment report in early July and the final report in late August.

Citizen Assistance Centers

NDI is supporting the efforts of the advocacy group Movement for Nicaragua (*Movimiento por Nicaragua*, MpN) to improve the national identification card process and enable more citizens to participate in the upcoming election. Since February, youth representatives of MpN have assisted 3,000 citizens in Managua in obtaining birth certificates and fulfilling other requirements to obtain a national identification card. NDI is supporting a stepped-up campaign through new Citizen Assistance Centers (CACs), currently operating in León, Masaya, Estelí, Chinandega, Granada and Matagalpa. In May, NDI: developed a database for MpN to track pending applications; trained project officers and CAC Coordinators on data entry and management; and facilitated a meeting between representatives of MpN and the American-Nicaraguan Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) to discuss the national identification card process. Following the meeting, AmCham and Supreme Council of Private Enterprises (*Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada*, COSEP) members signed a joint letter to the CSE requesting a meeting to discuss ways to facilitate the national identification card process.