

NICARAGUA

El Comandante Returns

By Francisca Ortega

For his presidential campaign erstwhile revolutionary Daniel Ortega chose a former Contra as his running mate, changed his party's color from red to a diluted pink and watered-down his fiery Leninist rhetoric to "peace, love and reconciliation" with a John Lennon soundtrack.

And won. After 16 years in the opposition and three failed presidential runs, Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), have retaken the reins in Nicaragua.

"Number one you have to recognize [Ortega's] a very persistent man. He doesn't give up," Nicaraguan journalist and former Sandinista Carlos Chamorro told a UC Berkeley audience.

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America but also the poorest. More than 30 percent of the population over age 15 can't read, half live below poverty level and nearly 45 percent are underemployed.

What will Ortega's reelection mean for the country, and what can be expected from his presidency? Chamorro's answer was that it is too soon to tell. As a candidate, Ortega did not lay out a clear plan for his presidency and avoided

all debate and media interviews during the campaign.

While expressing optimism that Ortega will govern well, Chamorro added, "My biggest fear is that he won't be able to enact the social reforms that the country needs."

Caught between voter expectations and a shortfall of cash, Ortega will have to tread carefully to pass reform legislation. Nicaragua's economy is reliant on loans and foreign donations. To keep that money flowing, the president will have to continue working with the International Monetary Fund, which in turn will limit how much he can spend on social programs.

For Chamorro, the solution to this problem lies in tax reform. In a country of over 5 million people, only about 100,000 pay taxes, he said. But members of the business community argue that they need the tax breaks to compensate for Nicaragua's instability. Negotiating tax reform will not be easy. Since the elections, Ortega has sought to calm the business sector through a series of promises that mark a nearly complete about-face from his anti-imperialist stance of the 1980s; he has vowed to respect private property, encourage small-businesses and continue a diplomatic relationship with the United States.

"[Ortega's] not proposing a socialist economy. He's basically saying, 'I want to guarantee investment, but I have my own priorities. And my priority is to help the poor. My priority is social problems,'" Chamorro said.

At the same time Ortega is strengthening his friendship with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a fact that has some in the United States worried. Before the elections Oliver North and Paul Trivelli, the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, warned voters against supporting Ortega. In the months since the election, however, the U.S. and Nicaragua have agreed to work with each other.

"He's not promoting revolution. He's promoting reform, but he will always have a tendency not to accept that that what's he's doing because Ortega sees himself as a revolutionary leader not as a normal president. He's *el comandante*," Chamorro said in an interview after his speech. "He's always playing with the revolutionary rhetoric."

Ortega was reelected in large part due to an agreement he made with his formal rival, ex-president Arnoldo Alemán, in 2000. Known as "*el pacto*," this agreement changed election requirements in Ortega's favor. Under the new rules, instead

Carlos Chamorro.



Photo courtesy of Carlos Chamorro.



Photo: Getty Images.

Supporters of Daniel Ortega celebrate his victory.

of a 45 percent majority, Ortega needed either 40 percent of the vote or at least 35 percent and a 5 percent lead over the second place candidate to avoid a run-off.

These rules are “like a tailored suit for Daniel Ortega, who has always had about 35 to 40 percent of the vote,” said Chamorro.

Negotiated at a time when Ortega was facing political fallout from charges that he molested his stepdaughter, el pacto also gave Ortega more control of the judicial system and the National Assembly. In return Alemán received only house arrest after being convicted of money laundering, embezzlement and corruption.

Alemán’s Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) fractured over el pacto and the corruption charges. Eduardo Montealegre ran for president as head of the conservative, pro-American Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) created by disaffected former PLC members. Ortega’s FSLN coalition also unraveled in 2006, and the Sandinista offshoot party, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), fielded Edmundo Jarquín in the presidential race. Eden Pastora, the famous Sandinista turned Contra, also ran in the election.

This splintered opposition allowed Ortega to win the election with just 38 percent of the vote, a smaller

percentage than he received in the previous elections which he ultimately lost.

Ortega also gained votes by reaching out to the Catholic Church and ex-rival Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo. The Cardinal officiated at Ortega’s marriage to his longtime girlfriend, Rosario Murillo. Ortega then passed a ban on abortion 10 days before the election.

“(Ortega says) we’re starting a revolution, but it’s a spiritual revolution, and what does that mean? Nobody knows,” said Chamorro.

People in the country are anxious, but hopeful, Chamorro said. They are willing to give Ortega the benefit of the doubt.

Renowned journalist Carlos F. Chamorro was formerly the editor of the Sandinista newspaper *La Barricada* and currently serves as director of the television program *Esta Semana y Esta Noche* and as editor of the weekly paper *Confidencial*. He spoke at CLAS on November 30.

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