calculations take precedence over ideology and programmatic commitments.

In the absence of stable legislative majorities and effective party discipline, presidents have to rely on ‘mobile majorities’—transitory alliances based on understandings and deals that readily collapse as circumstances change. Thus, while the Correa administration scored an initial victory thanks to the PSP, prospects for a meaningful alliance between MPAIS and the PSP are dim. Moreover, Lucio Gutiérrez is already preparing another presidential bid in 2010, so is likely to be a fractious player in the reform process, especially to maximise his power in any future constituent assembly. Rafael Correa’s success or failure as President is likely to hinge on his ability to anticipate, manage, and reconfigure the Byzantine alliances in Ecuador’s party politics.

References


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The presidential and parliamentary elections in Nicaragua, November 2006

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On 5 November 2006, Nicaraguans went to the polls to elect a President and Vice President, 90 deputies to the National Assembly and 20 representatives to the Central American Parliament (Parlacen). For the top position they selected Daniel Ortega Saavedra, the candidate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The National Assembly seats were divided among the FSLN, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) and the Liberal Nationalist Alliance (ALN), with no one group holding enough seats to take decisions independently. A small number of seats went to a splinter Sandinista party, the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS). The distribution of Parlacen representatives approximated that of the National Assembly.

1. Background

Daniel Ortega’s presidential victory comes in the regional context of Latin America’s ‘year of the ballot’, a reference to the fact that, between December 2005 and December 2006, the citizens of eleven Latin American countries (representing approximately 80% of the region’s voters) went to the polls to chose new political leaders (Castañeda and Nava, 2007). This election cycle has confirmed a resurgence of the political left in Latin America, with notable victories by left-leaning candidates in countries including Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela. The election of Daniel Ortega, while in part a confirmation of this leftward trend, reflects the singular characteristics of the Nicaraguan election system, as well as the particular circumstances of the 2006 election campaign.

Nicaragua has held regular elections since 1984. The 1984 elections were the first since the Sandinista
revolution of 1979, and Daniel Ortega, then a member of the ruling revolutionary junta, was selected as President. Journalists and other international observers accredited the election as free and fair, but the United States government, which had encouraged the main opposition contenders to boycott the election, publicly condemned the process (Richard and Booth, 1995). In 1990, Ortega lost to an opposition coalition which benefited from extensive support from the United States government. These elections, too, were certified by international observers as free and fair, and are widely heralded as a turning point in Nicaragua’s transition to democracy.

Since the transfer of power in 1990, Nicaraguan politics have remained polarised. Ortega and the FSLN have tried to recapture political control in every subsequent election. In 1996, amid allegations of irregularities and fraud, Arnoldo Aleman, the candidate of the PLC (running at the head of a Liberal Alliance coalition), prevailed with 51% of the vote, defeating Ortega by a margin of 13 percentage points. In 2001, Alemán’s Vice President, Enrique Bolaños, was elected to the presidency with 56% of votes, defeating Ortega by 14 points. The repeated victories of conservative candidates led some observers of Nicaraguan politics to postulate a durable conservative preference among Nicaraguan voters, despite the nation’s revolutionary history (Anderson and Dodd, 2005). So what changed in 2006?

2. Electoral system

The Nicaraguan election system combines a plurality vote for president with proportional representation in the legislature. The president and vice president are elected on the same ticket by popular vote for a five-year term. Nicaragua’s legislature, the unicameral National Assembly, has 92 seats. Two seats are reserved, one for the previous president and one for the runner-up in the presidential race. The remaining 90 legislative deputies are elected from closed lists, a relatively restrictive form of proportional representation (which combines features of largest remainder and highest average systems, allocating seats first using the Hare quota and then d’Hondt divisors). Twenty are elected from a national list, and 70 from separate lists in each of the 15 departments (and two autonomous regions). This arrangement produces “exemplary party discipline in the National Assembly” but reduces legislator accountability to the voters they represent (Dye, 2004: 17). Legislators also serve a five-year term.

The rules governing the 2006 election reflect reforms put in place in 2000 as part of a power-sharing pact negotiated between Alemán of the PLC and Ortega of the FSLN. This pact, created to break paralytic gridlock between the executive and legislative branch, served to politicise the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) (as well as local and municipal election authorities), the Supreme Court, and the Comptroller General’s Office, by guaranteeing a balanced division of appointments among partisans of the two leading parties. It also included provisions designed to reduce fragmentation in the party system, and relax controls on campaign funding.

These reforms were first put to the test in the 2001 elections, and remain in effect despite criticism at home and abroad (Dye and McConnell, 2002: 43). The specific reform that played the largest role in the 2006 election is that stipulating that a candidate can win the presidency in the first round of a multiparty race with either 40% of the vote, or 35% of the vote and a 5 percentage point lead over the nearest competitor. The latter provision was critical to Ortega’s first-round victory in 2006 (see Table 1 below). Another influential 2000 reform limited the formation of alliances

Table 1
Results of the elections in Nicaragua, 5 November 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate/party</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>National Assembly</th>
<th>National deputies</th>
<th>Total seats(^a)</th>
<th>Parlacen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>Votes (%)</td>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortega/FSLN</td>
<td>930,862</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>938,609</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montalegre/ALN</td>
<td>693,391</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>644,180</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rizo/PLC</td>
<td>664,225</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>691,570</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarquin/MRS</td>
<td>154,224</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>199,809</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastora/AC</td>
<td>7200</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>13,280</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2,449,902</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>2,487,448</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Registered voters 3,665,141, turnout 66.8%.
Source: Consejo Supremo Electoral 2007, author’s calculations.

\(^a\) Seat totals for the ALN include two non-elected seats reserved for the outgoing president (Enrique Bolaños) and the runner-up in the presidential election (Eduardo Montalegre).

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and imposed a 4% threshold for parties to maintain their registration and thereby receive public reimbursement for campaign expenses. Thus, whereas 22 parties had participated in the 1996 general elections, by 2001 the field had narrowed to just three. In 2006, five parties were represented, though one (the Alternative for Change, or AC) performed poorly enough to lose its registration.

3. Campaign

The campaign was marked by a number of events and controversies. Deep divisions within the elite on the right resulted in the participation of two prominent right-leaning parties, the PLC and the ALN, and thereby ensured that the 2006 election would not amount to a two-horse race, as in 2001. This split had its genesis in the 2001 campaign of Enrique Bolaños, who promised to fight corruption if elected, and when he took office in 2002 made good on that campaign pledge. This resulted in the eventual conviction of his predecessor Arnoldo Alemán on charges of embezzlement. In 2003, Alemán was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment—later commuted to house arrest—and ordered to pay a $10 million fine after being found guilty on charges including money-laundering, fraud, embezzlement and electoral crimes, including diverting up to $100 million in state assets for his electoral campaign (BBC, 2003).

Alemán, however, remained an influential political figure in the PLC, controlling the party from behind the scenes. In 2005, he joined forces with Ortega in an attempt to reinterpret the constitution to curb executive powers and increase the role of the National Assembly (which their parties jointly controlled). Rumours circulated that they would seek to end Bolaños’s presidency before he had completed a full term in office. Bolaños turned to the Organization of American States (OAS) for assistance and in June 2005 the OAS invoked the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which requires the organisation to take action when a democratic breach occurs in one of its member states. By October 2005, with the diplomatic intervention of the OAS, a political compromise was forged which diffused the crisis and allowed Bolaños to serve out the remainder of his term.

Based on these developments, the rift between Alemán and Bolaños and their respective supporters became entrenched. Bolaños left the PLC. When the time arrived for the party to choose a presidential candidate, Alemán loyalists backed his handpicked selection, José Rizo, while Eduardo Montealegre, who served in Bolaños’s administration and had hoped to win the PLC nomination, was shut out. Montealegre responded by forming the ALN, with Bolaños’s support. The deep divisions among liberals resulted in a split vote on the right.

Meanwhile, a similar split on the left appeared to be a strong possibility up until July 2006. Herty Lewites, the popular and charismatic former Sandinista mayor of Managua, originally sought the FSLN candidacy, but Ortega manoeuvred to avoid an open primary, thus locking Lewites out. The latter then agreed to run as the candidate of the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS), a splinter party which had formed in 1995. Lewites vowed, if elected, to put an end to the pact with the PLC, and to return to ‘authentic’ Sandinismo. The serious challenge he posed to Ortega was confirmed in a poll taken by the International Republican Institute in early 2006. Asked how they would vote “if the election were today”, 31.8% expressed support for Montealegre (ALN), 25.4% for Ortega and 23.7% for Lewites, indicating that the electorate on the left was relatively evenly split between Ortega and Lewites (Angus Reid, 2006).

Herty Lewites died suddenly of a heart attack on 2 July 2006. His eventual replacement as the candidate of the MRS, Edmundo Jarquín, never achieved a similar level of popular support. The party also registered multiple complaints with the CSE and international election observers about unfairness in the conduct of campaigning and the elections. For example, MRS officials contested the party’s disproportionately small share of positions on local and departmental election councils (the partisan composition of which is prescribed by the 2000 election reforms) (Briones, 2006). The MRS also called for caps on campaign spending, expressing concern about the improper use of state resources by other parties. Having lost its first-choice candidate, and being at such a disadvantage in campaigning, MRS prospects declined significantly by November. As a result the presidential campaign became effectively a contest between three parties.

A second notable characteristic of the campaign was the outspoken participation of international community in support of various candidacies. The United States government, including Ambassador to Nicaragua, Paul Trivelli, openly expressed support for Montealegre and the ALN on multiple occasions; other luminaries of the US right, including Oliver North, voiced support.

1 The poll margin of error was 3%. The options in the March 2006 IRI poll did not include Rizo who would not be officially named as PLC candidate until April 2006. Alemán was included as a proxy, and drew 10.9% support.
for Rizo and the PLC (Juárez, 2006). Two weeks prior to the election, Republicans in the US House of Representatives began to prepare “contingency plans to block any further money remittances from being sent to Nicaragua in the event that the FSLN enters government”.2 Meanwhile, self-styled revolutionary President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela exercised his influence on behalf of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN. In the last weeks of the campaign, Chávez provided a shipment of oil at reduced cost, sent fertiliser for distribution in Sandinista municipalities, and flew 100 Nicaraguans to Venezuela for free eye surgery as a promise of future aid in the event of a win by the FSLN (McConnell, 2007: 85). Interestingly, Chávez kept a lower profile in Nicaragua than he had in other elections in the region, perhaps for fear that his intervention could prove counterproductive. In Mexico, for example, voter concern that international efforts to influence the Nicaraguan election would follow Chávez’s radical social agenda may have cost him the closely contended presidential election of July 2006 (Roig-Franzia, 2006). International efforts to influence the Nicaraguan election were pervasive enough to earn a rebuke from the OAS (Sandoval, 2006).3 However, because these efforts did not coalesce around a sole party or candidate, it is unlikely that they were determinative.

4. Results

The final results for the four separate electoral races are shown in Table 1. Turnout (based on the number of valid votes cast in the presidential race) was relatively high, at 66.8% of registered voters.4 Ortega (FSLN) won the Presidential race with 38.0%, enough for victory because it was more than five points ahead of his nearest challenger’s vote share. Montalegre (ALN) was that nearest challenger, edging out Rizo (PLC) for second place, the right-wing rivals polling 28.3% and 27.1% of the vote respectively. Jarquin (MRS) polled just 6.3%, a weak performance suggesting that many voters on the left cast strategic votes for Ortega.

Pastora (AC), never considered a serious contender, polled at under 0.3%.

The final composition of the National Assembly included 38 seats for the FSLN, 25 for the PLC, 24 for the ALN, and 5 for the MRS. So the legislative results in the departmental and national races approximated the presidential results, but with one important difference, namely that the PLC edged the ALN for the second largest contingent in the National Assembly. No party alone can pass legislation, but as the PLC retained the second highest number of seats in the assembly, it will likely preserve the benefits that go to the second-strongest party as part of the 2000 political pact.5

In the Central American Parliament, a purely advisory body, 8 of the 20 elected seats went to the FSLN, 6 to the PLC, 5 to the ALN and 1 to the MRS.

5. Re-electing the revolution?

At his inauguration in January 2007, Daniel Ortega was accompanied by the presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, as well as Cuban Vice President José Ramón Machado, symbolising his ties to the Latin left. And Ortega’s return to the presidency of Nicaragua follows a regional trend in which electorates disenchanted with the performance of leaders from the right and centre-right have sought change by voting for candidates from the left. As his first act in office, Ortega made Nicaragua the fourth nation to sign the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a free trade pact promoted as an alternative to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas. Also, like many of his left-leaning counterparts, Ortega has promised both to expand social programmes and to renegotiate the terms of structural adjustment programmes imposed by the international lending community. This is undoubtedly important to Nicaraguans, who live in the third poorest country in the Western hemisphere (after Haiti). In 2006, per capita income was $3000, and nearly 50% of Nicaraguans lived below the poverty line (CIA, 2007).

Nevertheless, despite these signs of change, it should be remembered that it was the politics of compromise that brought Ortega back to the presidency. Ortega’s pact with the former leader of the PLC created the institutional conditions for his victory. Without the 2000 electoral reforms which lowered the threshold for a first-round election win, Ortega would have faced a run-off election against the ALN’s Montalegre.

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3 The OAS publicly reiterated this concern on 22 October.
4 Total voter turnout was actually higher than 67%, since this calculation does not include voters who cast blank ballots, or whose ballots were later invalidated. The CSE has not, to date, released information about total voter numbers, valid/invalid vote totals, annulled polling stations or results by polling station. This is unusual compared to past practice in Nicaragua, and to international standards; however, it is not a violation of Nicaraguan electoral law.
5 There is much political discussion about whether the pact will be reworked, or new terms reached.
Despite the power-sharing pact between the leaders of the PLC and FSLN, and the animosity between the ALN and the PLC during the campaign, it is likely that most PLC voters would have supported Montealegre in a second round. Meanwhile, the split between the parties of the left is such that some supporters of the MRS might not have supported Ortega. In short, as much as Ortega’s win expresses very real citizen demands for new solutions to entrenched social problems, it must also be understood as a product of the electoral context, specifically the 2000 election law in combination with a divided opposition in 2006. Whether political change or continued compromise will characterise the next five years in Nicaragua remains to be seen.

References


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The parliamentary election in the Netherlands,
22 November 2006

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1. Background

The second cabinet headed by Jan Peter Balkenende was appointed on 27 May 2003, after his first cabinet fell, which resulted in an early election on 22 January 2003 (Irwin and van Holsteyn, 2004). Balkenende-I had included ministers from the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), the conservative-