

Ortega chooses former enemy as running mate

Former Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has chosen a surprising running mate: the man whose house he confiscated.

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Former Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's house -- a six-bedroom estate with a formal salon, vast dining room and a couple of cottages out back -- has long represented the ill-gotten goods of the Sandinista era.

Ortega snatched it after his Sandinista guerrillas gained power in a 1979 revolution, and he reportedly paid just \$2,000 for it when he left office in 1990, when experts estimated the two-block compound was worth a half-million bucks.

These days, the luxury home in Managua's El Carmen neighborhood has come to symbolize something else: reconciliation.

In an "only in Nicaragua" political move, Jaime Morales, the original owner of the house and a man who fought a losing legal battle to get it back for a decade, has become Ortega's vice presidential running mate in the November election.

"I never had hate in my heart," Morales, 69, said by phone from Managua. "I am sensible. I am not obsessed. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life shouting, 'Give me that house back!'"

OPPORTUNISTS?

While Ortega's Sandinista Front views the alliance with Morales as a symbol of a nation that has forgiven and forgotten after its bloody civil war in the 1980s, analysts say the duo are opportunists whose pairing illustrates the eroding ideologies in a nation that was paralyzed last year after a pact between once-warring parties.

"The Sandinistas sell it as reconciliation; people see it as politicking," said political analyst Carlos Fernando Chamorro. "I see it as a desperate effort to sell an image."

Ortega, now 61, was a teenager when he first joined a guerrilla movement trying to topple dictator Anastasio Somoza.

Morales, the great-grandson of 19th century Nicaraguan President Evaristo Carazo, founded his own bank, became wealthy under Somoza and built the house in the late 1960s. When the Sandinistas toppled Somoza in 1979 and Ortega became president at the age of 33, Morales, like many wealthy Nicaraguans, was exiled.

The day after the July 19, 1979, rebel triumph, with Morales in Mexico, Ortega seized Morales' home under an absentee owner law applied to many Somoza-era officials who had fled abroad.

Morales' antique furniture and gun collection went into storage. Ortega returned those about three years ago, but Morales says part of his art collection still hangs on the walls of the Central Bank.

In a 1991 interview, Morales told The Miami Herald how he learned of the confiscation: when his Mexican-born wife returned home, Ortega's wife answered the door wearing Morales' daughter's bathrobe.

Morales became a leader in the U.S.-backed guerrillas, known as the *contras*, that fought to overthrow the Sandinistas during the 1980s. In 1988, Morales got to know Ortega up close when Morales was a chief negotiator in talks to end the war.

Those negotiations led to 1990 elections, which Ortega lost. Under a law adopted in the last hours of Sandinista rule, the government confiscated the two square blocks of presidential residences and allowed Ortega to buy them. Ortega has routinely said he doesn't remember how much he paid, except that it was "very little."

Government officials later estimated the purchase price at \$2,000 for a home, furniture, gun and art collection that Morales said was worth \$1 million. The house came to epitomize the Sandinistas' property grab, dubbed the *piñata* after the candy-stuffed figures that kids whack at birthday parties.

MENDING FENCES

Like thousands of Nicaraguans who lost their homes, Morales filed a complaint seeking the return of his property. Like others, his case sat dormant for years. Morales says he and Ortega "reached an amicable agreement" three years ago through what he calls "transparent transactions" that he won't specify.

Morales, who is now a congressman, says he doesn't see the paradox in his joining the Ortega ticket.

"I think Ortega has matured, learned from his mistakes and has sincerity and desire to get to public office to have true reconciliation," Morales said.

He said his pro-business background and desire for positive relations with the United States will not conflict with Ortega's leftist anti-U.S. rhetoric, because "times have changed."

But Morales admits that he has yet to visit Ortega's home.

"Why should I go there?" Morales said. "It was already my house."

Cynics say Morales just likes to be close to power. He was the right-hand man of former President Arnaldo Alemán, a harsh Sandinista critic who succeeded Ortega, but broke from him during a corruption scandal for which Alemán is now serving a 20-year sentence.

Chamorro, the analyst, says Morales needs a new benefactor, and Ortega -- who lost the last three presidential elections -- needs votes.

Although polls show Ortega neck and neck with former foreign minister and front-runner Eduardo Montealegre, they also show him falling short of the 40 percent he would need to avoid a runoff. And according to the polls, Ortega would face a resounding defeat in a runoff.

"What Ortega wants to do is calm nerves," said political analyst Arturo Cruz.